

Several years ago, I was asked to conduct the funeral of a man I had known growing up. **I had always liked the man, but had an out-of-town commitment the day of the funeral.** The family was unable to change the date of the service, so had to find another pastor. A part of me was relieved. **The man's son had been a bully when we were younger and on several occasions had beat me up, always in front of other people, which had been painful as well as embarrassing.** I hadn't seen him in thirty years or so, wasn't eager to reconnect with him, so was secretly glad I wasn't available for the funeral. I had thought of him many times over the years, with a surprising bitterness. **I remember several years ago, Spencer asking me if I hated anyone, and I told him "no."** But just as soon as I said "no" my childhood nemesis came to mind, and it was clear I still carried some hostility and resentment toward him.

Then, several months ago, I was at a restaurant and who should be there but this man. **Hadn't seen him in all those years, he'd moved some distance away, but had returned to our hometown to visit his elderly mother and take her out for lunch.** While I was eating, he approached me and we began to talk. We talked for about five minutes, and you know what? He was still a jerk.

He laughed about being mean to me. He even mentioned to the waitress how he used to pick on me. It was awkward. **I felt as if I were back in junior high and he was bullying me all over again.** But instead of hitting me with his fists, he was hitting me with words. He recalled the delight he'd taken in bullying me. He had heard I'd become a pastor, and made fun of that. **I was growing very upset, wanted to lash back at him, but didn't want to lower myself.** I tell you, this Quaker pacifist thing is such a hindrance. You can't ever sock anyone in the nose. So I just wished him well and returned to my meal, but all the while I was eating my sandwich, I was thinking to myself, "That man is pure evil."

He and his mother finished eating. **I watched as he helped her to her feet, then supported her as they left the restaurant, him holding onto her, being very caring and attentive.** It was clear she was precious to him. I was seeing a side of him I'd never seen before and I caught myself thinking, "Well, maybe he's not pure evil."

These past weeks, we've been talking about some basic theological principles—the nature of God, the nature of Jesus, the nature of humans, the church and its purpose, and sin. When you set out to construct your theological worldview, you will eventually have to face what theologians call "the problem of evil."

Very briefly, the problem of evil is this: “How can an all-loving, all powerful God permit evil?” **I’ve resolved this by concluding God isn’t all-powerful, that humans have free will, the power to choose between good and bad, and because we have that power, God’s power is necessarily limited.** Anyone who has children knows that as your children grow older your power over them will have to lessen so they will have sufficient freedom and power to grow and mature. When they’re little, you make their decisions for them. **As they age, you give them the power to make more decisions for themselves.** You limit your power for the sake of their growth and maturity. Is our relationship with God any different?

So I don’t think the problem of evil is God’s lack of power. We all experience limitations to our power. **Incidentally, our response to those limitations reveals our maturity.** Immature people, when they realize they don’t have power over something, fight it, resist it, pout about it, get angry about it. Mature people say, “There are limits to my power, there are some things within my control and some things outside my control, and I will learn to live with it, making the best decisions I can about the things I can control.” **This isn’t passivity, this is the awareness that because other people have freedom to choose between good and bad, our own wishes and desires might not always be realized.** We won’t always get our way.

I think God came to that conclusion a long time ago—that the only power we have is the power to choose good over bad, that other people have that same power, that sometimes they will choose to do bad, and there isn't much we can do about that. The only thing we can do is say, "Insofar as it depends upon me, I will choose to do good."

So I don't think the problem of evil is why God permits it. Once the possibility of freedom existed, evil became an unavoidable part of life's equation. Could God have created a world without freedom? **Certainly, just as some parents seek to control their children all their lives.** But it would have happened at the cost of our growth and maturity, and that was apparently too high a price.

The problem of evil is that we too easily and readily find it in others. We think that is all some people are. I was sitting in that restaurant, looking across the room at my nemesis, thinking there was no good in him, no redemptive quality, no light in his darkness. **And just as I was thinking what a bad person he was, he leaned into his mother and hugged her.** It was infuriating! You work up a good contempt for someone and then they do something nice.

I was reading an article this past Monday about President Bush. It was written on the occasion of World AIDs Day, a day dedicated to raising awareness about AIDs. So there was an article about President Bush. **I have been very critical of many of President Bush's decisions and policies.** I have even demonized him. But this article was about the AIDs initiative he'd begun in Africa. It quoted the President of Rwanda, Paul Kagame, who talked about how much better off his country was because of President Bush's dedication to improving global health. Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair said, "President Bush's efforts have saved literally millions of lives."¹

Yes, the problem of evil is that we too easily and readily find it in others.

I had an old baseball coach, Buck Leath, who died about seven years ago. **His four grown children asked me to conduct his funeral, so I met with them to plan the funeral.** They told me stories about him, then said, "You have to share his favorite quote." And they all repeated it together, from memory. You can tell they'd heard it a million times. **"There's so much good in the worst of us and so much bad in the best of us, that it hardly behooves any of us to look down upon the rest of us."**

¹ <http://www.cnn.com/2008/US/12/01/world.aids.day/>

We're sneaking up on Christmas. When John the gospel writer sat down to write about the birth of Jesus, he knew about our tendency to see evil where it wasn't, wanted to remind us of the good even in those we think evil. "The true light that enlightens every person was coming into the world," he wrote. (John 1:9)

That's what I'm going to remember this Christmas, the little theological maxim wise people have always known—that there is so much good in the worst of us and so much bad in the best of us, that it hardly behooves any of us to look down upon the rest of us.